

## TRANSLATED REPERTOIRES IN MALTA, FROM SECULAR TO RELIGIOUS: THE CASE OF VINCENZO MIFSUD AND OTHER MALTESE COMPOSERS OF THE NINETEENTH AND EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

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In talking about the topic of musical translations across the Mediterranean, one needs to be specific about what one is meaning by translations. I am meaning the transfer of a genre of musical tradition which is 'secular' and its adoption for a religious framework. In fact, we have three cultures, French, Italian and eventually English being adopted in Malta for religious usage. Sometimes, this involved controversy as a secular, anticlerical music was being given a religious significance, creating controversy in Malta. Again, Anglican and Imperial tradition (Elgar, for example) was being used for Catholic Music. I will be writing explicitly about this in Malta through the music that was played in churches during colonial times. At a time when there were no recordings or concert halls in Malta (and theatre was serving the few) the common people listened to music (and the new trends in music) mainly in churches. Obviously this was a source of controversy.

The nineteenth century is regarded as the golden age for Maltese sacred music. The local Catholic Church was a secure and reliable patron. Yet the nineteenth century was also the time of great political turmoil. At first, religious belief was not perceived as an enemy to national aspirations. '*Religio et patria*' was the political motto of the Risorgimento movement in Italy. However, events in 1848 would delude many in Italy and the Roman Catholic Church would cease to be perceived as a force that could bring about the Unification of Italy. Until 1848, Pope Pius IX was seen as a possible leader who could bring about unity in Italy. Instead, his reaction dispelled such thoughts and put an end to Vincenzo Gioberti and the neo-Guelfic movement. Nonetheless, within this political movement, music ended up playing an important role.

In this article, I seek to analyse how church music in Malta was influenced by operatic music, which, today, is a genre of music considered as forming part of the secular idiom. This was not the case two hundred years ago. It was only after the 1848 revolutions that this musical genre began to be considered anti-religious following the stand taken by the fathers of the unity of Italy against the Roman Curia. By then, Italian operatic music began to be used to foment political propaganda in favour of Italian Unity.

### **The Demographic Aspect**

I shall be looking at the repertoire of sacred music compositions in Malta during the early nineteenth century. Normally, the history of music is studied by musicologists. In this case, the history of music in Malta, at the threshold of the Romantic Period, is being analysed from a historian's point of view, taking advantage of the historical demographic studies of individual Maltese families to explore the career development of a number of Maltese composers who earned part, if not all, of their living by composing and conducting sacred music at the Cathedral Church and other major parishes and churches in Malta. In my research, I came across the works of some of Malta's earlier composers and, in particular, their contribution to the development of sacred music on the Island. Therefore, I am more intrigued by the sociological and political influence that this music had, and still has on contemporary Maltese society rather than being driven by musicological rigour. Malta is fortunate enough to have an extreme wealth of manuscripts of early music scattered in various ecclesiastical archives. The earliest compositions date back to the sixteenth century.

For early music to have come down to us in its original format is highly unlikely. Musical scores were handed down from one composer to another, and in the course of time, musicians made slight or major adaptations to suit their purposes.<sup>1</sup> For this reason, one has to research whether, throughout the course of time, composers or as in Malta's case, bandmasters (who in some cases were also musical directors of local wind bands) in playing this same music, made any changes or introduced their own arrangements creating a work which was markedly different. The development of wind bands in Malta is strictly linked to the British period and dates back to the first half of the nineteenth century. The presence of wind bands participating in religious processions goes back to the 1820s.<sup>2</sup> The archival registers of the harbour town of Cospicua record the hiring of an English military or naval wind band described as the 'banda del R.M.', taking part in the festivities in honour of Our Lady of the Rosary in 1828. For the same feast, held in 1826,

records refer to the services of a band, but this time in all probability it was made up of local elements, for the records simply describe it as a 'banda e tamburi' (band and drums).

Many works have come down to us in different manuscripts which were used during concerts by various conductors who all too often happened to be composers. Scores were meddled with and changes made to the original so as to update and comply with the exigencies and musical fashions of the time. All these changes have to be established and identified together with any changes made over the years. It should be pointed out that this occurred in Malta because of the predominance of the band movement (each town and village in Malta has at least one band club with some villages having two if not three clubs) and the lack of certain instruments. In the mid-nineteenth century one notes the steady growth in Malta of the wind band movement with bandsmen dressed in uniforms with the overall set-up having a formal 'martial' formation. Gradually, these bands were turned into proper philharmonic associations or clubs, with statutes, premises and members of their own.<sup>3</sup>

Recently, at the music archives of the Augustinian Order in Valletta, I was fortunate to come across an old antiphon dedicated to Our Lady, under the dual title of 'Beata Mater' ('Oh Blessed Mother') and 'Flos Carmeli' ('the Flower of Carmel').<sup>4</sup> Antiphons were a form of motet—sacred songs with Biblical texts consisting normally of short Latin stanzas of three verses or more—written in honour of the Virgin Mary, a saint or Jesus Christ. Originally, they were sung in Gregorian chant but, by the turn of the second half of the nineteenth century, voices moved in counterpoint to the main melody. By the sixteenth century, these short poems began to be accompanied by string and woodwind instruments and eventually by brass instruments. In Malta, by the early nineteenth century, these antiphons were mostly sung accompanied by orchestral music during high feasts.

The music for these two antiphons was composed in the early nineteenth century by a Maltese composer with the name of Napoleone Vincenzo Mifsud, known as Vincenzo Mifsud. Born in Malta in 1807 Mifsud seems to have died abroad (Mifsud Bonnici 1960: 348). From research carried out on this manuscript, I realised that it must have passed through different hands over the years. All conductors and musicians who played it during religious services made their own changes to the original manuscript to the extent that any link with the original work was lost and it ended up being attributed to the work of some other composer whose importance on the local scene was minimal. But what was relevant to my study was the fact that this composition is clearly a local example of how a musical

piece was 'translated' and made meaningful in contexts alien to the original manuscript.<sup>5</sup>

In the course of my research I found that this antiphon, in a varied format, is still being used at the parish church of Cospicua by the local church choir. Yet in this case the composition is attributed to a local composer by the name of Lorenzo Galea. In reality, Galea was the person who had rearranged or, better still, had rewritten this composition to meet new ecclesiastical exigencies that were introduced in 1903.<sup>6</sup>

Although in Malta this antiphon is nowadays associated primarily with the Feast of Our Lady of Grace in Żabbar, the same music has been used for the antiphon for the Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel at either Mdina or Valletta. Its musical component remained the same; however, the text varied in the 'Flos Carmeli' motet. Without making any changes, Mifsud used the same musical composition for the antiphon of the Assumption, 'Odie Maria Virgo' (sic) as well as for other feasts, applying the same music to the text of the following antiphons: 'Manum Suam', 'S. Maria Succurre Miseris', 'Conceptio Tua', 'Laudate per gl'Innocenti', (sic) 'O Melite Dignia Proles per S. Publio', 'Sancte Michele', 'Fuderunt Saguinem pell'innocenti', (sic) 'Per la Consagrazione (sic) della chiesa,' 'Fundator per S. Giorgio' and 'Veni Sposa Christi'. This shows that the antiphon was also used for the festivities of St. Publius, the Immaculate Conception (*Conceptio Tua*), St. George and St. Catherine amongst others. There is also another version for the feast of *S. Maria Succurre Miseris* (Our Lady of Perpetual Help), which leads us to believe that it was played in the parish of Bormla. In fact, it is under this title that the antiphon is nowadays being performed in Bormla following the arrangements made by Galea. There is also a version of this motet for female voices (known as 'Manum Suam') that most probably was used for the feast of St. Helen. The same motet is also performed during the festivities of the Virgin and Martyrs since we find the words 'Veni Sposa Christi'. The same composition was also performed in some parishes celebrating the feast of the *Massacre of the Innocents*, which, in the past, was also a very important religious event.

Indeed, there is here a process similar to parody, which in the present context may be defined as 'a vocal composition in which the original music is retained but a new text substituted in place of the old one' (Bowman 2002: 122).<sup>7</sup> Probably, in this example, Mifsud was following the Reformation model when Protestant psalmodists drew on chanson melodies or adapted Catholic text to the Lutheran version. As I shall be explaining in this article, the re-working of the music of Mifsud's motet

by later composers, in particular by Lorenzo Galea, brings in the defunct usage of parody as a reaction to the Church ordinance of 1903 to which I shall be returning later in this paper.

### **The Making of Music for Antiphons**

The types of antiphons produced by Mifsud were known in Maltese as *kerrejja* (literally, a lease); however, as used here, the term refers to 'shared' music and, in this case, it stands for those scores whose music was used in more than one antiphon or for a number of different antiphons. In itself, this form of composition brings to mind a similar situation that was very common in Europe at the time when the composer wrote this musical score, at the turn of the nineteenth century. At that time, also, composers used to copy arias from other works and include them in their own compositions. This can be considered as a process similar to the use of 'musical quotations'. This was done as a form of tribute, rather than to 'plagiarize' other composers' works, or to suit the vocal style of the singers taking part. At that time, some conductors and impresarios in Malta were known for the practice of introducing these 'substitution arias' from one work to another during the same lyrical performance. Singers were allowed to introduce into an opera an aria from an entirely different composer, as long as it suited the singer's voice and character (Xuereb 1994: 65).

From an orchestral point of view, Mifsud's 'Beata Mater' is very interesting and it reflects his musicianship and proficiency as a violinist. Conductors at the time were often the lead violinists. His composition is for first and second violins, solo clarinet, flute, trombone, two horns and double-bass. It is odd though that he excluded the oboe, which we know became popular around 1670, and the cello even though in this case he could have used the score of the double-bass. Also, the parts for the viola were missing. The first reason for these absences is to be linked to the availability of viola or oboe players at the time. Therefore, composers had to make sure that their compositions could still be played even if no viola or oboe player was available. Secondly, the absence of the parts for viola and oboe was remedied by the fact that if the composer wanted to add the sound of any of these instruments during a performance, he could easily do so by adapting the score from the basso continuo part. The same holds for the cello which was also missing from this score.

In Malta, composers adopted the style whereby they eliminated the presence of the viola from their score when writing sacred compositions. However, this does not mean that this instrument was not included in such

compositions as it was often covered by the organ continuo. This was the case with Mozart's sacred music and many others. In fact, many sacred compositions in Malta have a bass line, and under this generic term '*basso*', cellos and basses, as well as the organ continuo might be inferred. However, as explained, nineteenth-century Maltese compositions began to omit the oboe. This instrument, unlike the cello or viola, is not normally inferred from other parts, with the result, that composers deliberately began to omit its use in their sacred compositions. Mifsud's composition is a case in point. This was a new development, which in my view should not be attributed to a change in style or musical fashion but one which arose out of necessity.

A reason why the oboe was excluded could be the result of a local development in the history of music. In Malta, by the early nineteenth century, the clarinet became popular at the expense of the oboe. Young players preferred to learn the clarinet, which was considered a more versatile instrument and therefore better suited to a range of instrumental ensembles. This provided the clarinet players with more opportunities to play in various events and therefore earn more money. The setting up of wind bands in Malta at the turn of the nineteenth century changed the whole concept of public performances, even during religious festivals. Up until the late eighteenth century, religious processions were characterised by the use of portable organs, and the playing of string instruments, in particular violins, together with the flute. Once the new colonial rulers introduced the concept of military bands, the model began to be emulated by the local population. The clarinet is a *sine qua non* in wind bands, but its introduction came at the expense of the oboe with the result that composers began to experience a lack of oboe players and, as a result, began to exclude it from their works.

The Italian nomenclature used for the description of the clarinet instrument helps us date Mifsud's 'Beata Mater' towards the first half of the nineteenth century. The fact that a composer uses the word *clarino* indicates that this composition dates back to the end of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century. Before this period, the word *clarino* was normally taken to mean trumpet in D, as was the case with Mozart's music. However, in this particular case, this term clearly stood for the clarinet. The dating of this composition is also backed by the fact that the oboe is omitted from the score. Moreover, the use of the term *clarino*, meaning clarinet, continues to affirm the shared relationship that existed between this instrument and the oboe. At this same period, however, Salvatore Magrin (1763–1848) was still composing, using the word *clarino* to mean

trumpet in D (see Grech 2007) and/or clarinet (see Scicluna 2007). In the case of Mifsud, he opted for the total substitution of the instrument. This is an indication that this piece was not only written in the early nineteenth century but also attests to the increased popularity of the clarinet in Malta at the turn of the century.

Mifsud's style and genre provide other indications that help us date his work to this period. He was following Gaetano Donizetti's music whose compositions were introduced to Malta during the 1826 opera season when *L'Ajo nell'imbarazzo* was produced two years after its first performance at the Teatro Valle in Rome on 4 February 1824 (Miceli 2001: 30). The second opera by Donizetti produced in Malta was *L'Esule di Roma*; it was performed on 5<sup>th</sup> September 1829. This was premiered at the San Carlo in Naples on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1828 (Miceli 2001: 37). In May 1830, his opera *Olivo e Pasquale* was staged. Malta was the third country to produce it after Austria and Rome (Miceli 2001: 38). During the same opera season, Donizetti's *Gli Esiliati in Siberia* was also produced on 17 May 1830 (Miceli 2001: 30).

Donizetti can be considered the most important Italian composer to have influenced the Maltese prior to the advent of Giuseppe Verdi. Paul Xuereb, Maltese theatre critic, rightly notes that Gaetano Donizetti was the island's favourite composer in the twenties, thirties and forties of the nineteenth century and his music remained extremely popular until the arrival of Verdi (Xuereb 1994:69). Giuseppe Verdi's first opera to be produced in Malta was *Nabucco* and was staged on 5<sup>th</sup> October 1844. Donizetti was flanked by Bellini who hailed from Catania and this geographical proximity (even though Bellini's career was mostly forged in Paris) must have made his music accessible to Malta. Nonetheless, at the time there were three other extremely popular composers, Gioacchino Rossini, Saverio Mercadante and Giovanni Pacini; yet, their popularity in Malta never matched Donizetti's.

What we definitely do know is that it was Mifsud who, on the operatic lines of Donizetti, composed this antiphon. He was a pioneer in projecting Donizetti's music locally, shaping it according to the liturgical paradigm. However, listening to it, one cannot help observing that there is hardly anything sacred, at least not in the manner one perceives sacred music today and the devotional style that goes with it. As has been rightly shown by Marcello Sorce Keller (2011: 8, 103–104) sacred music was expected to be written in a way that pleases the ear but at the same time its timbre was expected to restrain sexual libido or to eradicate 'physical content'. For example, it was not expected to be written in a way that encouraged or

stimulated dancing. Opera music, on the contrary, began to be seen as a vehicle to introduce these new tastes in European music, even if, compared to first-century ethics, certain themes of the libretto no longer upset our present mores. When Rossini's opera *Mose in Egitto* was first produced in Malta in 1850, it was met with protest from the local clergy only for its libretto and not for its music (Miceli 1999: 100). The local clergy objected to this opera on the grounds that it contained the recitation of the voice of God on the stage. The opera *Fra Diavolo* met a similar reaction when it was performed in 1866 but this time for moral reasons. The clergy strongly objected to one scene where the soprano simulated a mock striptease (Miceli 1999: 152)!

Today, opera music is identified as being 'secular'. One should add that while local composers adapted lyrical music, they succeeded in showing a cultural sensitivity to religious ritual and expressed their talent by supporting the written sacred texts with music scores that achieved a distinct vocalisation, which made their work sound 'sacred'. Thus, various local composers copied and adapted Italian operatic music to religious liturgy. For this reason it should be pointed out that a number of local composers were priests or clerics. I would like to mention three: Don Giuseppe Burlò (1772–1956), Don Giuseppe Spiteri Fremond (1804–1878) and Fra Salvatore Magrin. Their sacred compositions followed in the same tradition. They would never dare consider their music as non-sacred. Magrin was in love with the music of Giovanni Paisiello and the *bel canto napoletano*. Spiteri Fremond, for example, was the person to introduce Rossini's musical idiom to Malta's church music and made it 'meaningful' in the Maltese ecclesiastical context. He too shows evidence of adherence to the style of Donizetti, as is the case with his composition 'Juravit Dominus'. Once Verdi's music came into fashion, the local Nani family of composers adopted, not without controversy, his style for church music in Malta. In this case, as I will further explain, the Nani composers employed in their sacred compositions arias from Verdi's operas.

### **What Made Music Sacred?**

These composers definitely had a different gauge as to what sacred music should be and their measure was quite different from ours. To them the adaptation of lyrical music for church services still rendered the composition sacred. In fact, I want to emphasise that a number of composers, who were composing music in this new style, were members of the clergy and religious orders. I think that they would have been extremely offended if someone



would have told them that their music was not sacred. For them, sacredness was not only expressed by a strict canon producing a particular timbre of sound which today is associated with church music. Perhaps an anecdote recounted to me by Albert Borg, a friar, and former maestro of the cappella of St John's Co-Cathedral in Valletta, explains this better. According to him, when in 1903, the Roman Curia issued the directive to limit or better still reform church music by eliminating the operatic element, the local composer who was entrusted by the local church to compose music according to the new rules was severely criticised by the local clergy. Paolino Vassallo was a layman who began to compose sacred music devoid of any operatic connotations. When Vassallo began to perform his music in the local Cathedral Church—which, as I shall explain later in this paper, followed the late nineteenth century compositional style that had been developed in Paris, in particular by Gounod—the Monsignors of the Cathedral used to wait for him at the cathedral door and tease him each time he entered by asking him, 'What are you going to play today to make us fall asleep?!!!'

Even if the operatic style was being used for sacred services, it did not signify that these compositions lacked the sacred or were intended to turn the church into a theatre. At the end of the day, the beauty was associated with the mores of the time dictating the style of music for church services. This kept the church at the forefront of the music scene. What was of paramount importance for these late eighteenth and early nineteenth century composers was that their pieces were appropriate and capable enough to uplift the listeners in church. This criterion overruled any other.

Listening to Mifsud's antiphon, one finds that the lyrics are completely traditional and conservative while the orchestration is relatively progressive and, as already stated, on the lines of Donizetti. In this I see some form of compromise on the part of the composer who wished to ensure that his composition was worthy and acceptable to be played in church especially during Marian functions.<sup>9</sup> It seems that Mifsud also tried to introduce to neighbouring villages the same antiphons which were being performed in the towns. He had at least one other composition in the same vein; 'Gabriel Arcangelus, Locutus est Maria'<sup>10</sup> which was composed for the feast of the Annunciation celebrated on the 25<sup>th</sup> of March.

The musical culture in the churches of that time was different from what exists in Malta today. While today each parish ensures that it has its own antiphon with its particular orchestration that will only be heard on the feast day, in the past one notes the practice of the same composition being re-used from one parish church to another with the result that the same music was heard at more than one venue. I believe that Mifsud

should be considered to have ensured that these antiphons and hymns became strongly integrated in the local church music tradition, thereby making them known and popular. Antiphons are nowadays considered as 'the signature tunes' of the Maltese village *fešta*. In fact, the feast antiphon is played on the eve and twice on feast day. On feast days, it is first played when the Saint's relic is transferred from a side altar to the main altar thus officially initiating the celebrations. Then, the antiphon is played again on the feast day in the morning, at the end of the High Mass, and again in the evening, when the procession with statue of the saint returns back into the church. Each time that the antiphon is played, it is followed by a round of applause and words of praise in honour of the saint.

Composers began paying more attention to the importance of antiphons as they gained popularity. Once their composition became popular, they were guaranteed a flow of commissions. Thus, it was in the composer's interest to compose well-structured music in terms of melody and make it appealing in terms of orchestration. This ensured that these antiphons became permanently linked with the feast. When an antiphon became popular, the scope of the 'shared' antiphon changed. Unfortunately, Mifsud's antiphon failed to follow this pattern. While his music had definitely left its mark on antiphon music in Malta, his music ceased to be played in our churches. Perhaps, the reason for this is to be attributed to the fact that Mifsud never diversified, and one melody could no longer fit more than one antiphon.

Instead, each village now demanded its own personalised antiphon for its feast. Thus, until a composer or bandmaster established himself in a parish, he very often 'shared' or adapted the words to a melody he had already composed for some other antiphon. The more so when he was not sure that the parish priest would still be using his services the following year. Once he was sure that his services were going to be required, and his position was permanent, he would then present his own distinct composition.<sup>11</sup> Finally, the antiphon became victim of its own success. Thus, a number of feasts ended up having more than one composition of the same antiphon, with the result that the older antiphons began to be played in the days running-up to the feast, whilst the more recent ones, which normally were composed for even a bigger orchestra than the one in the older antiphon, were played on the eve and on the actual feast day. Eventually, even special antiphons began to be composed specifically to be played solely during liturgical services on the days leading to the feast. Once a new *maestro di cappella* was appointed, he was expected to compose new works, including music for the antiphon used at that particular feast. The

music of the older antiphon was then normally relegated to be played on the days immediately preceding the feast, known as the *novena* or *triduum*. Eventually, they stopped being performed altogether. Mifsud's antiphon went through such a process and once his work was replaced by a new antiphon, his ended up being deposited in the archives and forgotten.

Mifsud's connection with the local feasts fell into oblivion and his antiphons and other compositions were no longer played in local churches, so much so that his name seldom appears in Malta's music history. His works are scarce even in Maltese ecclesiastical archives since he eventually left the island taking with him most of his works. Nonetheless, one can still trace some of his works in local churches and private archives.<sup>12</sup> Many of his works have been lost. The music used for this study is to be found at the music archives of the Augustinians where the manuscript simply bear the surname as already stated. However, because of style and the fact that Vincenzo Mifsud was the only composer with such a surname, these manuscripts can only be the work of one person.

In the list of Maltese composers and musicians that Pietro Paolo Castagna (1827–1907) published, entitled *Lis Storia ta' Malta bil Gzejjer Tahha*, (The Story of Malta and its Islands) (Castagna 1865) no composers by the name of Mifsud are included. The same can be said of the list compiled by Giovanni Faure (1837–1922) containing the names of composers of church music and of those who worked both for the Manoel Theatre as well as for the Royal Opera House (Faure 1913). The fact that Mifsud's name is missing from both lists (Faure copied Castagna's) appears to be an indication that the composer was not very active in Malta by the second half of the nineteenth century and, by then, his popular antiphons had been replaced by new compositions from other emerging composers. In a way, this reaffirms the social and economic aspect behind musical translations. There was an ulterior motive hidden in this musical productivity generated by convenience and the greed for popularity, which in turn led to more income.

It seems that despite his musical talent, Mifsud failed, or perhaps had no interest in penetrating the local ecclesiastical scene but instead preferred to try his luck abroad where he is known to have successfully produced operas, some of which he himself had composed (Rolandi 1932: 75) in Rome, Civitavecchia and also in Athens (Mifsud Bonnici 1960: 348). The local scene was left in the hands of other promising composers, some of whom were ecclesiastics. Already in the first half of the nineteenth century, Malta's church music scene began to be dominated by two distinct families of composers. This does not mean that Mifsud had no instantaneous impact (as explained earlier) but owing to the fact that he looked for new pastures

abroad, his fame was destined to wane among the local population whilst his music continued to be cherished by other composers who found inspiration in him for their new compositions.

### **The Creation of Musical Dynasties**

The first of these composers was Pietro Paolo Bugeja, whose descendants continued in his footsteps and whose musical legacy is now known as the music of the *Cappella* Bugeja. This family ended up following the musical tradition set by Saverio Mercadante (1795–1870) in Naples. As already explained, Mercadante's music was popular in the first half of nineteenth-century Malta, and together with that of Donizetti and Pacini dominated the local operatic scene. One of the descendants of this family of composers, Riccardo, was sent to Naples to study music with Mercadante (Schiavone 2009: 329).

The second musical dynasty that followed in Mifsud's steps in the translation from secular to sacred music was that of the Nani family. It was Paolo Nani (1814–1904), who in the late 1830s established the so-called *Cappella* Nani. As principal conductor and composer in residence at the parish church of St. Paul in Valletta, Paolo, like all his progeny, was expected to compose music suitable for the church. This tradition was upheld by his son Antonio (1842–1929) who continued to compose music for High Masses and all other types of religious services to the extent that over the years, this family of composers succeeded in building up a following that achieved the proportions of a fan club (Vella Bondin 2000: 16–20).

At first, composers sought to auto-censor themselves. The Nanis attempted to keep abreast with the two opposing currents. As composers, both Paolo and Antonio were conscious of the developments that were taking place in Italy and wanted their music to follow the new trends, in particular those proposed by Giuseppe Verdi, whose compositions had a long-lasting effect on them. At the same time, caution was the key word as they knew well enough that from the Church's point of view, Verdi was not the ideal composer to imitate, as his music was not liturgical and too profane in style, but, more important, began to be closely associated with the Italian Risorgimento, in the battle of the Kingdom of Piedmont against the Papal States.

Therefore, both Paolo and Antonio Nani express this internal dichotomy. On the one hand, their sacred compositions demonstrate the direction church music in Malta was taking in the second half of the nineteenth century. On the other, they sought inspiration from the Italian operatic tradition in particular by promoting Verdi's music in sacred liturgy. Antonio Nani, for

example, sought to construct his composition on what he thought would represent a perfect harmony, acceptable to the ecclesiastical hierarchy, as was the case with his composition *Messa in onore di S. Paolo Naufragio* (1871) known for short as *Messa del Naufragio*. In other words, he sought inspiration from Verdi's operas and the chosen arias were those that could instil some form of religious sublimity in the listener. The 'Credo' brings to mind music from the *Nabucco* and the 'Qui tollis' is possibly influenced the operas *Forza del destino* and *Trovatore*. At the same time, the 'Kyrie' and 'Cum Sancto Spiritu' reminds the listener of Verdi's *Requiem* as well as Rossini's *Stabat Mater*. The 'Cum Sancto Spiritu' possibly carries the character of the 'Dies Irae'. However, in this case, Nani could not have copied Verdi as the *Requiem* was written two years after *La Messa del Naufragio*. This bears witness to the extent that this composer identified himself with Verdi's style. Whether or not he succeeded in such a theistic intent is another matter.

Already in the late nineteenth century, composers had to be very discreet about the arias from Verdi's music from which they drew their musical inspiration. The choice either fell on solemn pieces within operas that evinced a religious character or from Verdi's religious works with the result that sacred music began to assume a particular style and colour. Moreover, there was the total elimination of references to female voices, and they were composed in a style that psychologically began to be associated solely with churches as by then opera music, as already explained, began being associated with politics due to its overtones with the new emerging states in Italy and Germany.

### Music as a Political Instrument

The Council of Trent had set the pace. By initiating ecclesiastical reforms it had also decreed that sacred music should be kept simple so that the words could be heard clearly. Elaborate polyphony and extensive use of instrumental accompaniment was discouraged. Yet composers were interested to achieve a form of musical perfection and despite the various efforts of the church to create distinct church music, composers were still left relatively free. Already, during the eighteenth century, Bishop Paul Alpheran de Bussan (1684–1757) in Malta was insisting on the use of the Gregorian chant whilst discouraging operatic music in church (Mercieca 2008: 140). The position of the Church would change completely in the middle of the nineteenth century. Even important composers such as Donizetti began to feel that wind of change, particularly since the new ethos that emerged

throughout the Romantic period brought in new sensibilities towards certain moral customs. While in the early nineteenth century Donizetti's music was held in high regard, it now began to give rise to ethical and moral questions. Up to this point, the real problem was not the music but the text.

Perhaps, it was within this context that Mifsud's music began to be arranged or translated into a more sombre idiom rendering it 'politically correct' for the church. At some point someone added a part for the organ. This addition appears to have been made specifically for the antiphon of the Carmel, 'Flos Carmeli'. However, what broke the camel's back, causing the translation of Italian lyrical music to sacred compositions to become anathema, was the great figure of the Italian Risorgimento, Giuseppe Mazzini. There is an aspect of Mazzini's life which usually escapes scholars. He was a great music-lover and even wrote a very important book on music (see Sciannameo 2004).

While there is no doubt that Malta 'was an insignificant dot on the operatic map', (Xuereb 1994: 59) politically the Island was serving as a sounding board for both the pro-Italian party and the anti-Risorgimento movement. Mazzini had his agents in Malta. While Italian opera was at first considered as neutral entertainment gradually it became a means of propaganda for pro-Italian unity. This was the reason why it was strongly supported by the British in Malta and was well received by the English officers who tended to be anti-Papal and pro-Italian Unity (Xuereb 1994). In fact, through the early nineteenth century, British governors gave asylum to the Italian refugees who escaped to Malta. British officers in Malta were sympathetic to Italian opera; however, such a sympathetic outlook would change in the second half of the nineteenth century, when a section of the Maltese elite began to claim the right to join the new State of Italy (Mercieca 2012: 37–41; see also Renna 2008–2009).

On an international level, things also started to change and Mazzini was the harbinger of these political changes in the Mediterranean. Perhaps Mazzini's tome on music did more disservice than good to sacred music, and the stand taken by the Church vis-à-vis opera in the post-Rossini period would have repercussions even in Malta. Italian opera began to be associated with the Italian Risorgimento movement. Verdi's operas became part of the Italian Risorgimento's propaganda machine so much so that the surname Verdi became a symbol of the Italian Risorgimento—Vittorio Emanuele Re D'Italia. The reaction of the clergy was now guaranteed.

### A Failed Musical Experiment

After the publication of guidelines by the Catholic Church in 1903, the use of operatic music was prohibited in churches during liturgies. Thus a sort of status quo was created. This *Motu Proprio*<sup>13</sup> prohibited new compositions on these lines but did not preclude the use of previous compositions to continue being performed in church. In Malta, this church ordinance was received with a certain resistance from both the clergy and the general public. Thus, it was agreed that those churches that had sacred music with a strong operatic influence could continue to use it, but composers were henceforth not allowed to use such an operatic style when composing for the church.

It took time for the local Church to come to terms with the situation. Unfortunately, this *Motu Proprio* ordinance regulating the reform of church music has wrongly conditioned the manner in which the Catholic church categorized music, instilling the false idea that there was a sort of religious music which is distinct from secular music and this religious music needed to be regulated by a cultural sensitivity to the musical structure itself. Thus any form of music which did not fall within this supposed liturgical guide line began to be considered not suitable to be performed in Catholic churches. What the Church sought to do was to create a repertoire for its own liturgical use based on the 1903 guidelines.<sup>14</sup>

The task of reforming church music in Malta in line with the above rescript fell to Paolino Vassallo (1856–1923), who had studied in Paris under Ernst Guiraud and Jules Massenet (Vella Bondin 2000: 106). However, despite the fact that after his return to Malta, Vassallo dedicated his life to church music, he was not given any space to develop his music. His so-called religious compositions were side-lined. A new attempt was undertaken by two distinct personalities. The first was Giuseppe Caruana (1880–1931) who borrowed melodic material from Vassallo's compositions and recomposed them into new fully-fledged popular church hymns. The second person who revived the operatic tradition in sacred music was Carlo Diacono (1876–1942).

In Diacono's time, the Maltese church was run by a British-trained bishop, Dom Mauro Caruana (1867–1943). He was a keen anglophile and in his earlier days, at the Benedictine Monastery of Fort Augustus in Scotland, he had been choir master and promoter of Gregorian chant (Schiavone 2009: 491). As the principal ecclesiastical church composer of the time, Diacono sought to please this new bishop, and exploited his role as *maestro di cappella* of the Cathedral to introduce in his ecclesiastical compositions elements from Edward Elgar's music balanced

with Italian tradition. The trick worked and lyrical tradition returned into local church music through the window if not through the main portico. Our bishop was jubilant. He was more than pleased with this sort of imperialistic influence echoing the call to seriousness, which the music of Elgar was considered to purport. Elgar's music had the required religious fervour in demand by Victorian England (Richards 2001: 60).

## Conclusion

Composers wishing to compose for the local scene had the option, which was being suggested by the congregation, to refer to past compositions and arrange them according to new regulations. In the process, these old compositions were transformed beyond recognition. I consider Mifsud's 'Beata Mater' as a case in point.

In fact, one has only to compare the antiphon of Mifsud's 'Beata Mater' which, as explained earlier on, was composed prior to the 1903 *Motu Proprio* with that of Lorenzo Galea (1893–1970), produced after 1903, to understand the transformation that took place in the field of religious music in Malta. Tradition holds that Galea's 'Beata Mater' was built on an older tradition. Faced with the changes that were being imposed from above, the villagers of Zabbar asked Galea to arrange their old antiphon and bring it in line with the new *Motu Proprio*. Galea ended up composing an antiphon that was within the remit of the 1903 edict, with differing instrumentation and style, and devoid of any apparent link. In reality, composers, like Galea, ended up composing totally new works. In the case of Galea, he composed a work which had nothing in common with the earlier Mifsud's work apart from keeping some string rhythms. Indeed on close scrutiny, one finds that the scores are two totally different pieces. Mifsud's is elegant, operatic in style and 1840/50s following Donizetti's music. On the other hand, Galea's score is melodically pure, reverent, not overdone in an operatic way and definitely without coloratura.

Galea, like the rest of the composers working for the church at the time, including Lorenzo Gonzi (1887–1934), Ferdinando Camilleri (1859–1942) and Domenico Anastasi (1886–1938), struggled to follow the new *Motu Proprio* ordinance. Balancing to make past operatic music acceptable for church service and liturgy and at the same time, taking note of the variety of brass instruments and players available at the time due to the expansion of band clubs in Malta, was not a simple



task. Nevertheless, this enabled these composers to introduce bigger instrumentation into their composition whilst making their church music acceptable also to the wind band expansion in Malta.

In sum, one can speak of a parody taking place where earlier music was being reworked to suit early twentieth century liturgical needs. A secular piece of music was being rearranged to serve a religious purpose, by reorganizing and expanding the original material and creating a new sense of it.

## Notes

1. Malta's old scores are being revived and gradually some old instruments are also being restored with the result that Malta's musical heritage is being brought back to life. In recent years a number of historic pipe organs have been restored. Perhaps the most important restoration is that sponsored by the Maltese APS Bank, of a portable organ made locally in 1777 (Debono 2005: 397) which is a combination of a positive and a piccolo or octave flute at the same time. It was an instrument specifically built to accompany castrato voices (Mercieca, 37–53).
2. Archives Parish Church, Cospicua Malta, *Libro Esito: Della Veneranda Confraternita' dell Santissimo Rosario Eretta nella S.Insigne Collegiata e parrocchiale Chiesa della Citta' Cospicua*, p. 117.
3. The same model developed in Italy, where by the early twentieth century all towns and villages ended up having a 'banda'. Soon, these Italian clubs began to influence the local band repertoire, creating a sort of a hybrid between Italian and the British military resonance.
4. Augustinian Priory Valletta, Music Archives, D-a-7.
5. On discovering Mifsud's score, I was immediately struck by the beauty of the music and believed it important for this piece to be performed. Subsequently, arrangements were made to have it performed by a graduate music student recently appointed bandmaster of a local Maltese wind band at a concert of sacred music in Attard. Mifsud's antiphon, under the title of *Hodie Maria Virgo*, was performed during an orchestral concert organized by the Philharmonic Society Stella Levantina of Attard in 2009 (see Mercieca 2009b).
6. Before Mifsud's antiphon could be performed it required editing. For this purpose I approached Frà Richard Divall, at that time, a Visiting Lecturer and examiner within the Music Division at the University of Malta, who kindly agreed to work on the editing of this score.
7. In the Middle Ages this was known as *contrafactum*, a term which described the substitution of in vocal music of one text for another without substantial change to the music.
8. See Mercieca 2009a.

9. Mifsud was not the only one to compose antiphons during this period. We know that the late eighteenth century composer, Francesco Azopardi (1748–1809), composed antiphons amongst which we have *In Sepulcrum* dedicated to St. Philip of Agira. (Debrincat 2004: 56–64). Next, we have Pietro Paolo Bugeja (1772–1828) (Buhagiar 2002: 51) who composed two antiphons for Malta's two main cathedrals: an antiphon for St John Co-Cathedral, entitled *Ingresso Zaccharia* in honour of Saint John the Baptist and another one for the feast of St Paul which was celebrated at the Mdina Cathedral. He also composed a number of antiphons including *Manum Suam* for the Birkirkara church and many for the different feasts celebrated in the numerous churches in Valletta.
10. This music is to be found in the private archives of the Augustinian Friars in Valletta.
11. I am indebted to Mgr. Gwann Azzopardi for this information. Mgr Azzopardi recounts that this information was told to him by Paul Nani (1906–1986) who was a distinguished composer and descendant of the Nani dynasty.
12. One of his compositions for the church was shown to me by Professor Joseph Vella. Another composition is to be found at the Wignacourt Museum in Rabat and more are preserved at the Cathedral Archives of Mdina and Gozo. In his M.Phil dissertation, Grech (1999) analyses the music manuscripts in the archives of this Cathedral where many of Mifsud's works are to be found including a number of sacred compositions. This attests to the fact that Mifsud's works must have been very popular in Gozo. This could explain why his name is not included in the Maltese lists mentioned earlier. In all probability Mifsud's activity was concentrated on the Church of the Assumption and eventually the Cathedral in Gozo.
13. The Latin word *Motu Proprio* which means 'of the Pope's own accord'. This particular *Motu Proprio* was issued on 22 November 1903 to stop the use of operatic music during the Roman Catholic liturgy.
14. In a very balanced and articulated rescript, Pope Pius X welcomed modern music into religious services, provided that compositions express '*excellence, sobriety and gravity that they are in no way unworthy of liturgical functions*'. However, in the Pope's view, modern Italian music was failing with regard to liturgical laws.
15. This was told to me by Fr. Mario Agius, who served as vice-parish priest at this locality for a short period of time.

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